

Maurice Hinchey NEWS

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HINCHEY AND COLLEAGUES FIGHT FOR FREE AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (NY-22) today released a letter he and 29 of his colleagues sent to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Michael Powell earlier this week. The letter, initiated by Hinchey with the support of U.S. Representatives Sherrod Brown (OH-13) and Bernard Sanders (VT-At Large), was endorsed by the Communications Workers of America and Consumers Union. It expresses serious concerns about the removal of rules under consideration by the commission that limit the number and type of media outlets a company can own in a local market.

"These rules originated in the 1940s after we saw what could happen when totalitarian regimes dominate their countries' news media," said Hinchey. "An independent and diverse media remains critically important today. Conflicts of interest are inevitable when corporations own news outlets. When one corporation controls the media for an entire locality, as will be possible with this rule change, that conflict of interest has the effect of depriving citizens of information to which they should have access."

Brown, a member of the House committee that oversees the FCC, said. "The FCC is the only safeguard consumers have to preserve some degree of independence in the media marketplace. Chairman Powell and other members of the FCC are deciding between competition and consolidation. They must stand up for consumers and keep the pro-competition regulations in place."

"The simple truth is that fewer and fewer large corporate-conglomerates own and control what the American people see, hear and read," said Sanders. "The result is that entire areas of human activity are largely ignored, while much of the 'news' is presented from a pro-corporate slant."

In September 2002, the FCC issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) on its broadcast ownership rules, such as those that prevent owners of broadcast outlets from owning newspapers in the same locality. It has become clear that the commission's intent is to severely weaken, if not eliminate these rules, thereby allowing for the consolidation of media ownership and potentially creating monopolies. A public comment period on this topic recently concluded.

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The FCC's move to relax the regulations comes at a time when an increasing number of Americans are finding fewer sources of news as corporations consolidate local radio and television stations and daily newspapers. According to the independent Consumers Union, the emergence of these consolidations has decreased access to independent media sources:

- Since 1975, two-thirds of America's independent newspaper owners have disappeared, and nearly three-quarters of America's media markets have only one local daily newspaper;
- One-third of the nation's independent TV station owners have vanished in the last 27 years. Cable networks offer an alternative to network news, but the networks' nightly news programs attract eight times as many viewers as the cable programming.
- Half of the time Americans use the Internet is spent on web sites controlled by just four companies, led by AOL Time Warner, the nation's second-largest cable company. National newspapers and companies that dominate the cable and network TV industries manage the content on the most popular news web sites.

Hinchey and his colleagues also expressed concern over the FCC's failure to adequately publicize this issue. To date, only one "field hearing" has been scheduled on the issue, which has received little attention from the press.

"The inescapable conclusion is that the FCC is trying to change the rules quickly and quietly before anyone notices," Hinchey added. "The fact that the media has largely ignored such a sweeping change further strengthens the argument for diversity in media ownership."